

This Week In Congress

August 16, 2004

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

I have spent much of August meeting with Kansans and visiting communities all across the "Big First" as Congress is in their annual district work period. This work session provides an excellent opportunity to update Kansans on work being done in Washington, D.C. and to hear about the issues facing our state.

Moscow Cotton Tour in Southwest Kansas

Kansas farmers are facing tough times due to poor weather and price conditions. This week I saw how some farmers in southern Kansas are trying to make things work through change and innovation.

On Tuesday, I joined the Kansas Farm Bureau (KFB) and the Northwest Cotton Growers Co-Op (NCG) in taking a look at the growing Kansas cotton industry. There are nearly 400 Kansas farmers, on 120,000 acres, raising cotton and proving that the agricultural landscape in our state is once again changing because of declining water tables and high-energy costs.

In 2003, Kansas cotton farmers produced over \$30 million worth of cotton, with over half coming from southwest Kansas. But the benefits of cotton production extend past the fields and into our communities, where four cotton gins will soon be operating in Kansas towns, and in Liberal, where a cotton warehouse is being planned. The development of cotton as a viable Kansas crop is putting Kansans to work by employing local people and diversifying our economy. Cotton also uses one-third less water than traditional Kansas crops. Water conservation, lower energy costs and diversity matter if farmers are to prosper.

Our panel discussion with producers was extremely informative due to participants, NCG President Tom Lahey, Jerry Stucky, Beth Moser, Kent Dunn, Dick Cooper and Bob Miller. It was clear from our discussions that the entrepreneurial and agricultural spirit is alive and well in Kansas and it gives me hope that we will succeed in these difficult times. A tour of this nature requires a number of people working together to make it a reality. I would like to thank KFB President Steve Baccus and Lahey for their work. I would also like to thank Dunn for allowing us to view his field and Stucky and Moser for allowing us to tour the NCG Cotton Gin.

On the Road in the Big First

The past week has allowed me to spend time traveling to communities across the state.

Ellis

On Monday, I was on hand to help dedicate the Ellis Elderly Project. The federal partnership with Northwest Kansas Housing provides five new duplexes-or ten individual units-for Kansans aged 55 or older. The housing units are approximately 1,000 square feet, with two bedrooms and an attached garage.

The Low Income Housing Tax Credit is currently the most important program through which the federal government encourages the development of affordable rental housing. It is a unique program that encourages private investors to provide equity for the development of low income housing in return for federal tax credits. Since the program began, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that over 900,000 units have been built nationally between 1987-1997.

Hays

Later that day, I was the guest speaker at the Hays Rotary Club and gave attendees a congressional update and listened to concerns on a range of topics, particularly the cost of health care.

Ulysses

On Tuesday, I traveled to Ulysses. The visit allowed me to speak to the Ulysses Rotary Club and answer people's questions. About 35 Rotarians and their guests were in attendance. Topics ranged from the war in Iraq to the challenges facing the rural health care system in Kansas. Rotarians were particularly concerned with keeping qualified medical personnel and the need for tort reform to bring down the cost of medical liability insurance.

The conversations that I had in Ulysses reflect the concerns that many Kansans share, including rising fuel prices, the need for a comprehensive energy bill and the importance of having a solid health care system for all Kansans.

Hoisington

On Wednesday, I traveled to Hoisington and Galatia to meet with area residents. During my stop in Hoisington, I was able to visit with a number of residents during visits to the Chamber of Commerce, city hall, drug store, donut shop, the school district office, Manweiler Chevrolet and Kansas Brick and Tile. Residents echoed concerns about the cost of health insurance and the need for a national energy policy.

Higher oil prices have cost the economy, and Kansans buy a great deal of fuel, but in Barton County and other oil producing Kansas counties, we are seeing a significant increase in exploration, drilling and production activities which help jump-start an important segment of the Kansas economy. The result is higher assessments to the oil and gas companies, with production in Kansas, resulting in an expanded property tax base and a greater number of Kansans again employed in the oil and gas industry.

Since last year, the House of Representatives has twice passed an energy plan but the Senate has failed to act. The goal must be to reduce our dependence on high-priced foreign oil.

Galatia

Following the Hoisington visit, I stopped in Galatia and spoke to folks at the Co-Op and local grill. The visits provided great feedback.

Kanorado

On Thursday, I spent the day in Kanorado. While there, I was able to stop by the Post Office, the local cafe and the Senior Center in time to join everyone for lunch. After that, I concluded my visit with stops at the Co-Op and grain elevator. These visits are useful in providing me with guidance to take back to Washington, D.C.

Meeting with Hays Medical Center Board of Directors

Health care remains one of my top priorities. The need to examine ways to improve the health care system in this country is real, and we must reduce the costs that each of us pay for health care services. In the past, this has been an issue that has mainly affected the less fortunate in our country and whether they could afford health care services. However, we are increasingly seeing the problem affect everyone, including the middle class.

This week, I attended a retreat of hospital board members of Hays Medical Center (HMC) to discuss what I see happening in Washington D.C. and in Kansas regarding health care. My wife, Robba, serves as a member of the HMC Board of Directors. Participation in the board retreat allowed me to hear from board members, physicians and HMC hospital administrator John Jeter on the issues they face as a regional medical center. I took away from this meeting a desire to work even harder to develop a plan to reduce health care costs or, at least, slow the escalating increases. The real issue with rising medical costs is not the hospitals and doctors but everyday Kansans and their families who struggle to pay the bills.

Disaster Assistance Approved for Summer Storm Damage

On June 12, severe storms ripped through Kansas and dumped nearly 10 inches of rain, along with high winds, tornadoes, hail and flooding, causing considerable damage to many communities in the First District. This week it was announced that the President declared 12 counties in the First District disaster areas, making them eligible for federal assistance.

The declared counties were Ellis, Geary, Graham, Jewell, Lyon, Mitchell, Osborne, Phillips, Russell, Rush, Smith and Trego. The disaster declaration grants communities in these counties access to funds from the Federal Emergency Management Association to help repair or replace disaster damaged public facilities.

These counties will also be eligible to apply for the federal Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. The program provides assistance to state and local governments for actions taken to prevent or reduce long-term risk to life and property from natural or technological hazards.

Kansas weather is never predictable, but this announcement means that some help is on the way.

In the Office

This week I had a number of Kansans visit my Washington, D.C. office for a tour of the Capitol. Among these Kansans were John and Susan Karlin and their children Jacob, Jordan

and Kendra of Hays, and Alan Conroy and his son Joseph of Topeka.

Also in the office were Rodney Denholm of Salina and Justin Robinson of Wichita, as were Dwight and Peggy Colgrove and their children Steven and Nic of Washington and Kayla Wilkenson of Morrowville. Kansas Supreme Court Justice Lawton Nuss and his children Arthur, Rachel and Graham from Topeka were in for a tour. Justice Nuss and I were classmates in school together many (*many*) years ago.

Very truly yours,

Jerry